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SUBJECT: UNHCR BRIEFS ON UZBEK REFUGEES

Classified By: Piper Campbell, Refugee Counselor, reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) briefed members of the diplomatic community on September 6 regarding developments surrounding the 429 Uzbek asylum seekers currently in Timisoara, Romania and the 15 who remain in detention in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. UNHCR said that it will complete Refugee Status Determinations on the 429 Uzbeks by September 22, and will begin referrals for resettlement immediately. It expects 11 of the 15 in detention in Kyrgyzstan to be released very soon, but had little new to say about the 4 individuals still awaiting a decision on whether or not they are eligible for protection as refugees. The Deputy Permanent Representative of Romania said that his government was pleased with the behavior of the Timisoara refugees and the level of response of the international community thus far. In response to his request that Government of Uzbek extradition requests be weighed, UNHCR offered assurance that, although none of the requests had been backed up with documentation, all were being thoroughly investigated and considered as part of the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process. End summary.

¶2. (U) The 429 Uzbeks who were evacuated from Kyrgyzstan to Romania are housed at a facility in Timisoara designed to hold 225 people. However, conditions at the facility are very good and the refugees, 80 percent of whom are men, are "orderly, clean, and maintaining good relations" with their Romanian hosts. UNHCR Special Advisor on Protection Rick Stainsby visited the population August 24 - 26 in order to assure that processes are on track to meet a timetable for resettlement and onward movement of most if not all of the refugees within 6 months of their arrival at Timisoara.

¶3. (U) Two steps are involved in processing the cases. One is to determine refugee status, a process being handled by 10 UNHCR officers. Initial plans were to have each officer complete two cases per day. However, interviews are taking on average 3 hours per person, meaning that not enough time is left to write up each case on the same day. Nonetheless, UNHCR expects to complete RSD interviews by September 19, and to complete written assessments by the end of the month. Exclusion issues and credibility of statements are being carefully reviewed as part of the RSD process. As of August 30, UNHCR had completed 205 RSD interviews, but only one case of possible exclusion - an individual who may have beaten a police officer after he was disarmed - had been identified.

¶4. (U) The other processing step is to prepare the cases for referral to a resettlement country. Biographic data has already been entered on all cases, and UNHCR completed resettlement interviews, including extensive documentation of family relationships, on September 2. As they are completed, the RSD assessments are linked into the referral data and cases are submitted to resettlement states. Vulnerable cases have been identified and are receiving priority handling. A German representative at the meeting reported that his government has approved 6 cases already referred to it and will issue travel visas shortly. UNHCR has also completed a draft resettlement submission (referral) plan, identifying which cases will be referred to which resettlement country. Family relationship data is being used as a key element in this identification.

¶5. (SBU) Stainsby said the Timisoara asylum seekers are "clearly refugees in need of a solution" and that their stories have high credibility given UNHCR's country of origin information and knowledge of the events in Andijan which precipitated their flight. He said that many of them have skills in the construction trades and described them as "impressive", reporting that they want to work and had even volunteered to assist in Romania's recovery efforts after the recent floods. Stainsby said that the refugees come from a "pious rural community where large traditional families are the norm." UNHCR Resettlement Director Eva Demant later noted that most of the refugees will want their families to join them when they reach their countries of resettlement.

¶6. (SBU) Romania's Deputy Permanent Representative said that his government's decision to accept the evacuation of the refugees to its territory had been important, and that his government is happy with their behavior since their arrival. He urged UNHCR to give careful consideration to any

information provided with Uzbekistan's extradition requests which may establish a grounds of exclusion. Stainsby expressed UNHCR's appreciation to the Government of Romania and said that one official had told him that he was determined to assure that the refugees have good memories of Romania when they depart. Stainsby added that UNHCR is carefully looking at the eighty extradition requests which the Government of Uzbekistan had submitted to the government of Kyrgyzstan.

¶17. (SBU) UNHCR Kyrgyzstan Desk Officer Frank Remus added that there are reports that 1,000 to 2,000 additional Uzbeks may be living underground in Kyrgyzstan. However, only 18 have come forward to request asylum thus far. He said that the GOK is under pressure not to register additional refugees, but that UNHCR is negotiating with the GOK to obtain permission to undertake registration and protection activities, including relocation for resettlement of additional refugees.

¶18. (C) Comment: Having conducted extensive interviews with large numbers of the Uzbeks in the calm and stable environment of Timisoara, UNHCR projected confidence that they will neither be problems during their sojourn in Romania, nor difficult to resettle quickly. In addition, UNHCR remains certain that 11 of the 15 Uzbeks still in custody in Kyrgyzstan will soon be released. It is noteworthy, however, that the UNHCR expert who extensively interviewed the four remaining individuals in Osh late last month had little to say about their cases or prospects. End comment.
Moley